

Amphibious Ships

Discussion

Naval amphibious ships combined with embarked Marines provide forward presence and flexible crisis response forces for employment in support of foreign policy objectives. These forces provide the most formidable amphibious forcible entry capability in the world. The development and maintenance of this capability is the statutory responsibility of the Marine Corps as directed by Congress in Title X. Amphibious lift requirements are formulated to support the National Military Strategy, satisfy combat surge requirements, and can also be tailored to meet real world day-to-day commitments.

Big deck amphibious assault ships (LHD, LHA) are the centerpiece of naval expeditionary forces and are essential to maintaining amphibious lift and power projection capabilities. Currently 11 big deck ships are in the inventory. The twelfth big deck, LHD 7, is under construction and will be commissioned in June 2001. In FY01 Congress approved incremental procurement of LHD 8. LHD 8 transition ship and follow on LHA replacement ships will better serve the Marine Corps' interests than the aged LHA 1 TARAWA class ships.

The warfighting requirement — the capability the Marine Corps strives to provide to our nation—remains three Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) Assault Echelons (AE), which currently equates to 14 Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs). The long standing requirement for an amphibious force structure plan that supports lift for three MEB AEs, recently reemphasized by congressional testimony and the SECDEF's Report On Naval Vessel Force Structure Requirements, remains a priority requirement.

Fiscal constraints, however, have limited amphibious lift to a programmatic goal of two and one half MEB AEs. This capability will be achieved with active amphibious ship force structure upon delivery of the twelfth LPD-17 class ship. In the meantime, maintaining LHAs and LSTs in a reduced operating status called the Amphibious Lift Enhancement Plan (ALEP) is a temporary fix meant to fill the gap between today's shortfall and the delivery of the LPD-17 ship class. This shortfall in active amphibious ships remains an area of concern. Accordingly, the LPD-17 program is essential to providing an air-capable, LCAC-capable, wet-well ship that is optimized to meet USMC surge lift requirements.

Marine Corps Position

The Marine Corps continues to support the Navy's shipbuilding program to achieve the fiscally constrained two and one half MEB AE amphibious lift capability but maintains a warfighting requirement to achieve three MEB AE amphibious lift. Modernization of the amphibious ship fleet, to include the timely replacement of the LHA 1 TARAWA class with ships capable of supporting current and future Marine Corps requirements remains a priority.